



Executive Summary

Purpose

Achieve, Inc., The Education Trust, The Thomas B. Fordham Foundation and The National Alliance of Business joined forces in 2001 to establish The American Diploma Project (ADP). The overarching purpose of the ADP is twofold:

- ✍* to help states strengthen ongoing standards-based reform efforts at the state level, and
- ✍* to help states align their high school graduation assessments (in reading, writing and mathematics) with the increasing demands of higher education and the new economy of the twenty-first century.

Using information gleaned from work in the partner states, the ADP will develop a new set of benchmarks that every state can use to analyze the quality and rigor of its current high school graduation standards and assessments.

The sponsoring organizations believe that the awarding of an American high school diploma should, at the very least, signify a level of achievement in reading, writing and mathematics that guarantees that American high school graduates have the knowledge and skills they need for success after graduation: the ability to attend a state college or university without the need for remediation, the assurance of a job that allows for promotion along a career path, or a professional placement in one of the nation's armed forces.

Making standards-based assessment data matter beyond secondary education is the best way to make good on the promise of standards-based reforms, which ensure that *all* our children will be exposed to the rich curricula and high expectations that can guarantee their success.

State Partners

Five states, selected from among fifteen states that applied, are partners in The American Diploma Project. The governors, chief state school officers, and higher education and business leaders from **Indiana, Kentucky, Massachusetts, Nevada and Texas** have agreed to develop plans for meeting the following short-term, partner-state-based ADP policy goals:

- ✍* considering standards-based achievement in reading, writing and mathematics as the essential core of partner states' high school diplomas
- ✍* considering standards-based high school assessment data as one criterion in higher education admissions and/or placement processes
- ✍* considering standards-based high school assessment data as one criterion in employer hiring processes

Workplan

The implementation of these goals and the important long-term work of developing new high school graduation benchmarks in reading, writing and mathematics will be grounded in the real-world experiences of the partner states. The American Diploma Project will therefore:

- I. provide **research** to partner states on what twenty-first century higher education and workplace expectations really are;
- II. establish **partner-state policy panels** that will develop plans for meeting ADP goals; and
- III. create a **national policy panel** that will build on the partner-state work to develop the new high school graduation benchmarks in reading, writing and mathematics that all states may use.

I. Research

There are three primary pieces of research: the first is state-based (analysis of higher education expectations), the second is more national in scope (the workplace study), and the third provides a legal framework within which states can build PreK-16 education systems, as implied by ADP goals.

- A. **The state-based analysis of higher education expectations** is designed to detail the content of current high school graduation and college admissions and placement assessments in each partner state, and to analyze the extent to which their current standards and assessments align to the stated expectations of higher education faculty in the state.
- B. **The national new economy workplace study** is designed to identify “good jobs” in the new economy (those with good earnings, sufficient training, and adequate occupational-entry and career-growth opportunities); examine the educational path of students who have performed those jobs; and develop a set of preliminary benchmarks that outline the knowledge and skills needed for those jobs.
- C. **The analysis of federal legal issues** is designed to reveal how the ADP may implicate relevant federal laws, to provide a legal framework for states to analyze their ADP-related efforts, and to recommend ways to minimize legal risk.

II. Partner-State Policy Panels

To meet the short-term partner-state-based goals of The American Diploma Project, the partner-state policy panels will use ADP research to inform and support the implementation of the following anticipated partner-state policy changes:

- A. **altering state high school graduation requirements** to include consideration of proficiency on standards-based assessments;
- B. **adjusting admissions and/or placement requirements at state colleges and universities** to include consideration of high school standards-based assessment data;

- C. **establishing exemplary statewide hiring recommendations** that include consideration of standards-based high school assessment data.

Partner states **plan to strengthen and revise high school graduation assessments to serve as better indicators of readiness to succeed in college or the workplace.** ADP partner-state leaders have agreed to stand hand-in-hand with the sponsoring organizations at the end of the partner-state policy-panel process, and announce plans for meeting these goals.

III. National Policy Panel

In 2003, the Project will convene a panel of partner-state representatives and nationally-recognized content-area and policy experts to review the research and the work with partner-states discussed above. This national panel will build on the state-based work to develop a new set of high school graduation benchmarks in reading, writing and mathematics that truly reflect the expectations of higher education and employers in the new economy.

As the partner-state policy panels complete their work, ADP will sponsor a “cross-states advisory” process, which will allow ADP partner states to convey their recommendations about the new benchmarks to the national panel, based on their own experiences.

The national panel may also consider other relevant research on high school expectations, both in the United States and abroad, including those of the International Baccalaureate, the European Union, and the armed forces. We will ask them to consider what an ideal set of high school expectations might look like, in order to reflect a complete picture of student achievement upon the awarding of a high school diploma. For example, we may ask them to consider whether the writing of a research paper or a requirement for oral examinations might be included in an ideal set of expectations.

With that said, however, *the primary goal of the national panel will be to determine the essential content and skills for high school graduation in reading, writing and mathematics.* As the panel completes its work, the Project will lead a national campaign to encourage all states to use the new benchmarks as a resource when refining their high school graduation standards and assessments to reflect twenty-first century demands. States that align their standards and assessments to the new benchmarks will be able to guarantee that their high school graduates have the knowledge and skills they need for success after graduation.

Conclusion

Success in the twenty-first century requires higher levels of verbal and mathematical skills than ever before, so it is necessary to create new high school graduation benchmarks that represent a new universal standard. The benchmarks will be developed from the bottom up, in consultation with key state leaders from each system: PreK-12, higher education, and business, as well as with citizens from wider state communities. The process of conducting new research and extracting the academic content from the stated expectations of higher-education and business representatives will ensure that the new benchmarks will reflect the knowledge and skills needed by every high school graduate, whether they are headed directly for college, the workplace or the armed services.

For more information, please visit www.americandiplomaproject.org.